

COPING WITH THE FEAR OF CORONAVIRUS

Managing Anxiety: Coronavirus Fears & Concerns

Anxiety is understandably high as we are learning more about the spread of COVID-19. The information below may be helpful in managing the fear you may feel. Resources for up-to-date medical information and advice about coronavirus are at the end of the article.

Managing fears

A good way to manage any kind of fear is to become educated about it. The more we know about the real dangers, the more we can take effective steps to avoid or minimize them, thereby putting some fears to rest. Accurate information is an effective antidote to unrealistic fears. The resources at the end of this article are a good source of accurate information.

Monitor your exposure to the news. Media news coverage can arouse emotion and increase fear. It's important to get the facts, but it may not be helpful to hear reports over and over. Be aware of how you and family members respond to news stories. Limit television or online coverage if it becomes distressing.

Put your risk into perspective. The term "pandemic" can be very scary. It's important to stay aware and informed, but try to make sure your level of fear does not exceed your risk factors.

Focus on what you have control over. News stories and images about the spread of a disease can make us feel anxious and helpless. Knowing how to minimize your risk can reduce anxiety. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have information about how to reduce your risk of contracting the virus.

Be always aware, but not always fearful.

Awareness means paying attention to news that is specific to where you live. Awareness is not the same as being in constant fear. Constant fear can create stress and be counter-productive. It can be harder to deal with a true risk when everything seems like a danger. We want to focus on what *is* happening, rather than getting caught up in thoughts of what *could* happen.

Take a break from the fears. Like changing a channel on TV – intentionally shift your focus away from stressful thoughts. Spend time doing things that can distract you from worries and that help you feel more calm and balanced.

Notice if fear begins to become panic. It's normal to be afraid, but if you find yourself needing extra support due to being anxious the majority of time, having difficulty sleeping or finding yourself unable to cope, you might want to talk to a professional. A licensed professional can help you understand the root of your feelings and work with you to find management strategies targeted specifically to you.

If children have fears, give them honest information at a level they can understand. You don't need to explain everything about the virus and risk. Give them only as much information as they request. Encourage your children to talk to you about their thoughts and feelings. Listen to their concerns, and then reassure them. Explain that there are steps that everyone can take to protect themselves. Limit your child's exposure to news reports. Seeing repeated coverage can be disturbing. It can be helpful to watch the news with your child and discuss it afterwards.

We have to walk a fine line between awareness and fear. Try to keep your thoughts in sync with what is actually happening, not what your worst fears may be. Understand that national and international health organizations are working diligently to understand the risks and keep the public safe.

Resources for more information

World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

WHO travel information: www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/travel-advice

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

CDC travel information: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html

Get support.

Talking through concerns and sharing your fears can help you put them in perspective and help you feel calmer. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available 24/7 to offer support to you and your household members.

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MANAGING REACTIONS TO CORONAVIRUS: SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

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Learning about the spread of a new disease can be scary. It's important for you to prioritize your own self-care to help you cope with any unsettling emotions this situation can bring. Self-care means making the choice to act in healthy ways rather than just reacting to events. Here are some self-care reminders that you may find helpful.

Physical coping strategies

- › **Getting enough sleep to feel rested** is a key ingredient of self-care. It impacts both mood and energy level. Establish a routine and get to bed at a reasonable hour.
- › **Physical activity** is a good way to reduce feelings of stress and tension. It will also help you sleep better, if it's done at least several hours before bedtime. Talk to your doctor before starting any exercise routine.
- › Eat **well-balanced meals** at regular times of the day.
- › Nurture yourself by **doing something calming and relaxing**. Deep breathing, meditation and progressive relaxation can help you de-stress. But simply doing activities you enjoy can also help release tension.
- › **Avoid alcohol and drugs** as a means to cope, unless your doctor gives you a needed prescription.

Mental coping strategies

- › **Get the facts** about the problem from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), rather than relying on the social media and television to provide information.
- › **Give your thoughts a break** from focusing on the "what-ifs" that scare you. Concentrate on the here and now needs of your loved ones, activities you enjoy, and the practical things you need to get done.

- › **Structure your time.** Large blocks of unstructured time will tempt your thoughts to center endlessly around what troubles you most. This can make your interpretation of what's happening more upsetting than it actually is.
- › **Remind yourself of your abilities and strengths.** Self-statements such as "I can handle this uncertainty" get you back in touch with the fact that you're steering your own ship – you're not a bottle tossing and turning on life's seas.
- › **Set short-term goals.** What are some things that you want to get done in the next hour? The next day? The next week? Focus on short-term accomplishments to help you feel more in control.

Emotional coping strategies

- › **Reach out to people who care and give voice to** your feelings and fears. Talk out your thoughts and worries with loved ones.
- › **Spend time doing enjoyable activities.**
- › **Have realistic expectations for yourself.** There are many unknowns in this situation, for which you cannot have the answer. You can't control every outcome. Give yourself a break and realize you are doing the best you can.

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REASSURING CHILDREN

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Kids today are as exposed to the news cycle as adults are, but they have less life experience to interpret what they're seeing and hearing. Your job isn't to shelter them from the news; it's to help them understand and process it. Children of all ages want reassurance that their family will be safe.

Talk about it

Monitor and talk about what they see on the news.

Be aware of what your children are exposed to (including via digital devices) and set limits. Watch the news with them and discuss it afterwards. Talk with teens about the importance of getting information from reputable sources and share examples, such as CDC.

Encourage your children to talk to you about their thoughts and feelings.

Let them express fears, thoughts and worries. Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Be ready for hard questions: "Will I get sick?" "What if it happened to you or Dad?"

Give direct, age appropriate answers. Children need facts to process what's going on and understand what it means. Be honest but sensitive in how you answer. Keep including messages of reassurance: "We're going to do everything we can to stay healthy."

Offer only as much information as they request.

Sometimes our own discomfort can push us to keep talking and we end up on shaky ground. Listen to what they're asking and answer that question. Period. It's okay to say you don't have all the answers.

Reduce anxiety, build up resilience

Reassure with words. Talk about safety precautions that public health officials, your community, doctors, and your own family are taking to stay safe.

Reassure with actions. Maintain family routines, particularly around meals and bedtimes. Express your love out loud. Make time to do things together, such as riding bikes, taking a walk, reading together, or playing board games as a family. Structure and normalcy feel safe.

If you have fears, turn to the adults in your life to help you cope. Sharing thoughts and feelings can help you feel stronger, but children are not capable of taking on the level of fear that this virus can bring out.

You know your child's personality and behavior patterns. If you see changes that concern you, and they go on for more than a couple of weeks, contact a mental health professional. Your EAP can help.

Common stress reactions in children

- › Sleep problems, nightmares
- › Changes in bowel or bladder habits
- › Change in appetite – eating more/less than usual
- › Talking about a variety of physical complaints
- › Moodiness, irritability, fighting
- › Inattentiveness, inability to concentrate
- › Withdrawing, not talking
- › Being overly emotional for no clear reason
- › Fear of losing/separating from caregivers

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